



The Reliable Greenhouse Cart



Greenhouse carts have gone through many incarnations. The latest is a color-coded, name-plated, transportation and merchandising machine that won't get lost and doesn't cost too much. At least that's what growers want and retailers expect.

By Beth Meneghini

The greenhouse cart. It doesn't hold the beauty or charm of the floral products it transports. It can't quite muster the impressive innovation of an automatic seeder or pot filler. And it simply doesn't grab your attention like a retractable roof.

It often may be the most overlooked element in a greenhouse operation, but carts have slowly and surely become a fixture in the industry that growers just can't live without.

When cart manufacturers first arrived on the greenhouse

scene, carts were built with growers in mind.

"When we started working with greenhouse carts, it was definitely focused on grower convenience," said Bob Grimm, vice president of sales for Cannon Equipment. Cannon began selling carts to the horticulture industry in 1978. "Growers were very open to the product because they saw the advantage of transporting goods on carts."

Today, manufacturers are still building carts, and growers are still the primary customers. But there has been a fundamental change in how greenhouse carts are used and who is using them.

RETAIL-DRIVEN CHANGES

There is a consensus among manufacturers that much of the shift in the cart marketplace is dictated by the ever-expanding role of mass merchandisers.

"There have been some significant changes in the cart market," said Dave Vanhoffen, a sales rep for VRE Systems in Ontario. "Carts are now used for much more than simply transport. Retailers want carts to play a role in marketing; not just delivering product but displaying it as well."

Several manufacturers now carry cart lines that both transport and display green goods. "Growers are still our customer, but it seems like ultimately we're selling what mass merchandisers are demanding," said Vanhoffen.

As a result, manufacturers are selling more benches and display systems. But, ultimately growers seem more interested in ideas on how to utilize their current cart supply for the dual purpose of transport and merchandising.

"We have separate lines of display benches, but growers have invested so much into their carts they are reluctant to get another new system," said David Van Dyk, sales and marketing manager for Karsten Metal, Brantford, Ontario. "Growers want to utilize their existing carts for shipping and retail dis-

play. The big box retailer influence is really behind what growers are asking from us."

In addition to carts that do double duty, mass merchandisers want carts that help streamline the delivery process.

"Retailers want their growers to deliver product quickly and efficiently, while still maintaining the high quality of plants," said Doug White, president of Wellmaster Carts, Tillsonburg, Ontario. "Sometimes, this translates into growers asking for larger carts or carts that hold a diversity of product. This helps them quickly move product at the big box stores using the least amount of labor. They can deliver a variety of product and get in and out without tying up the docking system."

Despite the continued pressure on growers to deliver more product faster, cheaper and more "retail friendly," the mass merchandiser influence is having a rather positive effect on cart manufacturers.

"With the exponential increase in growers doing business with the big boxes, the demand for carts is increasing exponentially as well," said Jerry Van Hoven of Battlefield Farms, Rapidan, Va.

Battlefield Farms offers a durable greenhouse cart at a lower price than most others on the market.

"Doing business with big box stores requires a heavy cart rotation program," said Van Hoven. "Economical carts help reduce the per-cart cost of doing business with these retail centers."

Many manufacturers have even begun to sell cart systems directly to mass merchandisers.

"One of the largest cart orders we've ever taken was from a big box store," said White. "This particular store wanted custom-engineered carts for several thousand locations. The design was completely unique to them."

WHAT A GROWER WANTS

Big box stores and retail garden centers aren't the only ones who know how to merchandise. ◆

COMPANY	CART	CONSTRUCTION MATERIAL	DIMENSIONS	WEIGHT (LBS.)	WEIGHT CAPACITY (LBS)	SHELF (WxD)	ADJUSTABLE SHELVES
Cannon Equipment (507) 263-4231	Transport Plant Cart (with or without SKF wheels)	Heavy-duty square tubular steel with gusseted corner sockets; bright zinc electroplate with lacquer dip finish	80 7/8" x 56 3/4" x 21 3/8"	143	750	54" x 20 7/8"	Yes
	Euro-Transport Cart, 5-flat	Steel tubing, with formed sheet metal and wire Zinc electroplated with four posts constructed of formed sheet, hot-dip galvanized steel	81" x 58 7/8" x 21 7/8"	99	600	57 1/4" x 21 5/8"	Yes
	Euro-Transport Cart, 6-flat Euro-Transport Cart, 7-flat	Same as 5-flat Same as 5-flat	81" x 69 7/8" x 21 7/8" 81" x 46 3/8" x 43 7/8"	106 110	750 1000	57 1/4" x 21 5/8" 57 1/4" x 21 5/8"	Yes Yes
Distribution Gro-Cart	Greenhouse Tray Cart	Steel, bright zinc electroplate with lacquer dip finish Steel tubing, with formed sheet and wire grid, bright zinc electroplated with a lacquer dip finish	82" x 48" x 43" 63 7/8" x 80 1/4" x 21 1/4"	243 100	1500 1000	45 5/8" x 41 1/2" 77 1/4" x 20 1/4"	Yes Yes
	Standard Hi-Cube Plant Cart	Steel, zinc-plated	84 1/4" x 44 3/16" x 31"	242	1000	44 3/16" x 31"	Yes
VRE Systems Modular (905) 945-8863	Transportation/Display Carts	Steel, hot-dipped galvanized after fabrication	75" tall, width & depth vary with model	Varies	1600	Varies	Yes
	Flattops	Steel, hot-dipped galvanized after welding	24" x 21" x 72"	45 (one-wheel) 55 pounds (two-wheels)	180	21" x 72"	No
Karsten Metal Inc. (519) 448-4000	Nursery and Customer Service Cart	Steel, hot-dipped galvanized after welding	13 1/2" x 22" x 48"	70	600	22" x 48"	No
	C2157, C2163, C2259	Galvanized steel	81" x 21 1/2"-22" x 57-63 1/2"	120	1200	21-21 3/4" x 54-60 1/2"	Yes
	C2467, C3144	Galvanized steel	81" x 24-31" x 44-67"	125	1300	23 3/4- 30 3/4" x 41-64"	Yes
	C4446	Galvanized steel	81" x 44" x 46 1/2"	130	1500	43 3/4" x 43 1/23"	Yes
	C2156	Galvanized steel	81" x 21 1/2" x 56 5/8"	120	1200	21 1/2" x 56 5/8"	Yes
Wellmaster Carts (519) 688-0500	Greenhouse, Nursery, Transportation, Merchandising and Garden Center.	Hot-dipped galvanized frames with mesh or galvanized sheet steel	81" x 22, 31 or 44" x 36-73"	30-300	1000-2500	22, 31 or 44" x 36-73"	Yes
	Tracking Wagon with patented kingpin steering and an articulated axle	Hot-dipped galvanized steel	4' x 8'	600	3500		Yes
	Side-sliding Carts	Hot-dipped galvanized steel					Yes
	Euro Carts	Hot-dipped galvanized steel					Yes
	Folding Carts	Hot-dipped galvanized steel					Yes
	Heavy-Duty Nursery Carts	Hot-dipped galvanized steel					Yes
Inca Metal Products (214) 436-5581	Ladder Carts	Hot-dipped galvanized steel					Yes
	Adjustable Nursery Cart	Hot-rolled pickled and oil steel, card-rolled steel square tubing, wire grid, hot-dipped galvanized steel or zinc plated	22-30" x 60" x 84"	200-275	750-1200	22-30" x 64"	Yes
	Fold-Up Transportation Cart	Same as Adjustable Nursery Cart	29-42" x 43-59" x 84"	325	1500	29-42" x 43-59"	Yes
Siebring Manufacturing (712) 475-3317	Get N' Go Cart	14-gauge steel, 1 1/4" x 1 1/4" steel angle Shelves may be expanded steel, steel, masonite or plywood	13" x 22" x 55"	125	400 (100 pounds per additional shelf)	22" x 55"	No
Transplant Systems Inc. (919) 523-0970	4-Wheel Nursery Cart	16-gauge tubing with 14-gauge metal deck	25" x 48"	105	600	25" x 48"	No
	Retail Display Cart	1 1/4" angle frame with expanded metal shelves	24" x 96"	300	40-50 flats	24" x 96"	Yes
	4-Wheel Retail Customer Wagon	1 1/4" angle frame with expanded metal deck	24" x 48"	85	400	24" x 48"	No
AG Industrial Services (916) 241-5959	Display and Transportation Racks	Expanded mesh	18-22" x 58-70"	153-200	600		Yes
Battlefield Farms Inc. (540) 854-6485	Ameristandard Carts	Galvanized steel	21.5" x 56.7"	110 (no shelves) 10 lbs per additional shelf	300 per shelf	21.5" x 56.7"	Yes



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Manufacturers agree that the second biggest trend in the cart market is the move toward customization.

"A majority of our orders are from growers looking for something to set themselves apart," said Van Dyk. "The carts are out there anyway so growers figure they might as well get some name recognition from them."

Karsten, Wellmaster and other manufacturers are color-coding carts or laser-cutting name, phone numbers or Web addresses on each cart.

Growers are also asking for bigger, better and stronger carts.

"Because there is such a variety of product out there, growers aren't as concerned with squeezing plant material on a cart like they used to be," said Dennis Doran, executive vice president and general manager of Cart Mart. "Growers want to get a mix of product on each cart, and they want to maintain high quality."

Van Dyk agrees, citing an increase in orders for wider or deeper cart shelves that will hold up longer. "Growers are not only customizing carts to help brand their name, they are also customizing to fit their specific product line," he said.

NEW SOLUTIONS FOR THE SAME OLD PROBLEMS

While several new trends are evident in the cart market, growers are still dealing with some of the same old problems.

"Growers are going to lose carts, no matter how much they cost," said Van Hoven. Battlefield Farms' answer to this is to offset the cost of annual losses by keeping cart costs low.

Cart Mart uses a similar strategy. The company sells both new and used lines but simply can't supply growers with enough used carts.

"As soon as we get used carts in stock, they're gone," said Doran. "We just can't get enough of them to meet the supply."

Doran says most growers report losing 10-15 percent of their fleet of carts during the year; many don't come back from a retail center or growers simply lose track of where they are.

"Growers can't tolerate the loss of really expensive carts," said Doran. "But the loss of something a little cheaper is much more palatable."

The ultimate in economic carts may be the wooden, reusable shipping rack from Universal Forest Products, Grand Rapids, Mich. Although more of a crate than a traditional greenhouse cart, this hardwood option is cheap, durable and available in different sizes.

Another innovative solution that may help growers deal with cart loss is a cart tracking system. Green Circle, Oberlin, Ohio, recently built a bar code tracking system for its own carts.

Using an outside software provider, Green Circle developed a database system that keeps track of each cart and where it is located. Handheld scanners record the bar code sticker assigned to each cart and download the information into a database.



"We've had the system in for just over a year," said Bill Watson, young plant manager for Green Circle. "So far it's gone really well. It gives us the reports we want and helps us turn carts faster, allowing us to send and ship more product with a finite resource."

Green Circle's tracking system allows users to pull up any of the company's customers and see how many carts the customer has, which carts they have and when they received them. Users can also pull up the bar code specific to each cart to determine where that particular cart is located.

"It's definitely reduced our paperwork, and we no longer have to devote one person to 'cart duty,' keeping track of all our carts. The system does that for us," said Watson.

ASB Logistics, Geneva, Ill., offers a similar cart tracking system, utilizing handheld scanners and bar codes. Both grower and retailer have access to the cart inventory and distribution data via a Web interface.

ASB also offers a unique cart-leasing service. Growers lease carts through ASB and turn over the responsibility of tracking them. ASB will track carts through the distribution chain, collect them at the retailer locations and redistribute them to growers.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Rumors that Lowe's, Wal-Mart and other mass merchandisers may be following the lead of many Northern European retailers in adopting a standardized shipping cart are, as of now, unfounded. Although most manufacturers and growers feel the U.S. market is too large and diverse in geography and product to use a "universal" greenhouse cart, mass merchandisers certainly have the power to dictate the path of many growers.

For now, retailers, growers and manufacturers will continue to work together, slowly but surely creating the perfect greenhouse cart, one that no grower could be without. GPN

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